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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 VIENNA 000682

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [AU](#)
SUBJECT: TIROLEAN ELECTION COULD RESHAPE NATIONAL
GOVERNMENT, BUT OUTCOME NOT PREDICTABLE

Classified By: Econ/Pol Counselor Dean Yap. Reason: 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (U) Summary. The June 8 state elections in Tirol could lead to federal Interior Minister Platter, an excellent USG interlocutor on counter-terrorism, departing Vienna to become governor of his home state. However, the outcome of the election is unclear because of the impact of a popular former conservative, now running as an independent and drawing support from across the political spectrum. End Summary.

Potential National Impact

12. (C) Though Tirol is one of Austria's smaller states, its June 8 election has the potential to change the make-up of Austria's federal government. Ruling conservative (OVP) governor van Staa is acknowledged, even by leading lights in his own party, to be personally unpopular. While all our interlocutors expect the OVP to emerge as the largest party, if it performs badly in comparison with previous elections (falling below 40%, for example), it could lead to van Staa's resignation. Several OVP figures are mentioned as possible successors, among them federal Interior Minister Platter. Views differ on whether Platter could win the succession. Elizabeth Zanon, one of Platter's rivals in the OVP and a figure also mentioned as a possible Health Minister should there be a federal cabinet reshuffle, expects him to stay in Vienna. Walter Guggenberger, a leading Tirolean Social Democrat (SPO), believes Platter will try to replace van Staa, but will lose out to Zanon. However, SPO national manager Josef Kalina claims to believe Platter has already struck a deal with OVP rebel Dinkhauser to replace van Staa.

13. (C) Comment: While Platter's departure from Vienna must be considered unlikely for now, were it to happen it would delay emerging U.S.-Austrian cooperation on counter-terrorism and combating international crime. Platter has been willing to engage us more deeply than would be expected given the political dynamics in Austria's grand coalition. Even an equally pro-cooperation Minister would have to move cautiously while consolidating his/her position, especially vis-a-vis SPO Justice Minister Berger. End Comment.

State-of-Play

14. (U) The OVP, which enjoys an absolute majority in Tirol's parliament and has led the state government for over 50 years, looks set to slip badly in June. In addition to the burden of an unpopular governor (Zanon describes his poll ratings as "in the cellar"), the party is suffering from the defection of Fritz Dinkhauser, a party rival of van Staa's who has set up his own organization -- largely for revenge because van Staa had blocked his rise in the party. The OVP stands now at just over 40% in opinion polls. To remind voters of the OVP's role in the state -- but also signaling concern that it could lose that role -- the OVP's first series of election posters simply featured postcard-style photos of Tirol's Alpine landscape with minimal text

emphasizing the state's prosperity and the identity of Tirol with the OVP.

¶5. (C) But the SPO has not profited from the OVP's weakness and stands at around 20% in polls. It has also lost votes to Dinkhauser, who came from the labor wing of the OVP. As junior partner in the current government, the SPO is also seen as having failed to pursue a strong social democratic agenda. In an effort, described by SPO Tirol campaign manager Meinhard Eiter as meant to emphasize the youthful vigor of the SPO (in contrast to the 66-year old van Staa and 68 year-old Dinkhauser), a heavily retouched photo of the SPO's 50 year old-leader, Hannes Gschwentner, in a black leather jacket astride a motorcycle offering voters an insouciant salute (which gave this American observer the impression of a Fonzie parody as played by Donnie Osmond) has produced, according to Guggenberger, chuckles across the state.

¶6. (C) The Greens have also lost votes to Dinkhauser, who managed to get the leader of the "Transit Forum" organization to join his list. The Forum is the major voice of Tirolean citizens upset about the booming volume of truck traffic running through the state between northern Europe and Italy. Figures from other parties, such as Woergl Mayor Arno Abler (OVP) also say the Greens have become identified with side issues -- such as gay marriage -- which do not win votes in Tirol. Many also note that the Greens have also lost their edge on environmental issues. Stephan Oblasser, head of Technology Development at the state-owned hydroelectric power company, notes that only 50% of the state's potential is being exploited, but that the Greens oppose further hydro development in favor of heavy subsidies for solar power.

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Though Green leader Georg Willy told PolChief in late April he hoped to win up to 20% of the vote, in mid-May the Greens stood at about 14% in polls and interlocutors thought they could take as little as 10% of the vote.

¶7. (U) The right-wing populist FPÖ was running a one-theme campaign directed against Tirol's non-European immigrant population. One poster proclaimed the party in favor of "Church bells' clang, not muezzin's call." Polls showed the party at about 12%.

Outcome Entirely Unclear

¶8. (C) In large part because of the Dinkhauser effect and the uncertainty of the final numbers, none of our interlocutors was willing to predict what the next state government would look like. The only option all would include was the inclusion of the FPÖ in any government. Guggenberger seemed to think a continuation of the status quo (OVP-SPO) most likely. Zanon, who was rather critical of van Staa and the old-line OVP leadership, said all options were open, including an OVP-Dinkhauser coalition (without van Staa), or an OVP-Green coalition. The OVP is officially playing up the possibility of an SPO-Green-Dinkhauser coalition to scare voters back into line. The SPO's Eiter said anything was possible. Watch this space.
Kilner